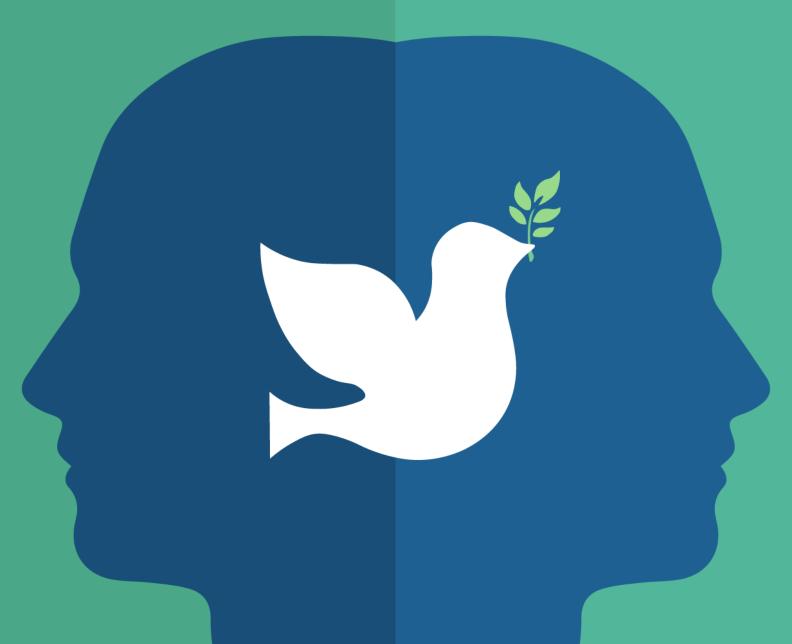


Better Conflict

How to break the cycle of damaging conflict and create healthier workplaces

by Emily McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza



Introduction

Conflict is the result of differing priorities. A simple solution to friction is to vilify people we disagree with, and examples set for us in the world get replicated in our relationships with family, friends, and colleagues.

But humans largely share the same set of values—things like physical safety, autonomy, and social relationships. Which ones take precedence depends on individual experience. If you grew up in a big family, you may value social relationships highly. If you grew up experiencing violence, you may value physical safety.

Conflict among colleagues works the same way.

Different values can be good for business. One manager who values cost working with another who values quality can create a more cost-efficient product than managers who share the same point of view.

But those differences can turn ugly. Over time, a lack of communication, a lack of openness, and a failure to understand ourselves and others can poison a workplace with bad conflict. "Conflict is a lot like fire," write Peter T. Coleman and Robert Ferguson, the authors of *Making Conflict Work*. "When it sparks, it can intensify, spread, and lead to pain, loss, and irreparable damage." Conflict is a lot like fire. When it sparks, it can intensify, spread, and lead to pain, loss and irreparable damage

When that fire starts, it spreads anxiety, resentment, and anger. It creates factions and leads to poor morale and bad decision making, driving people to squabbling and even sabotage (*Coleman, 2014*).

In this paper, we'll examine both bad conflict and good conflict, learning to recognize each by their defining characteristics. We'll show you how to move conflict into the open, where it can be managed; how to get "traction" for conflict resolution; and how those in power tend to lose their ability to understand others. Most importantly, we'll lay out how to use curiosity to get out of the cycle of bad conflict and replace it with something much healthier and more productive.

What is bad conflict?

Bad conflict damages us. It poisons our relationships and our wellbeing. It puts us on edge and keeps us from learning and growing. At work, it dampens our productivity, stunts creativity and kills innovation. It lowers job satisfaction and increases burnout (*Coleman, 2014*). It makes us dread showing up. Bad conflict leaves no room for us to be curious about other people (*Ripley, 2021*).

Bad conflict can take many forms:

4 Conflict for conflict's sake

It feels good and meaningful to defend your beliefs, but when those beliefs make no room for someone else's, we tend to fight back on principle, not in the search for truth. The more we experience conflict on behalf of what we believe, the more we assign it meaning, and eventually begin to seek out conflict (*Ripley, 2021*).

🗲 Us versus them

We all need to feel that we belong somewhere, and belonging to a group of likeminded people can give that to us. Soccer teams, book clubs, and cancer survivor networks are examples of groups where people can feel they belong. But when groups—no matter how innocuous—begin to see anyone who doesn't belong to their group as being against it, we cultivate belief in out-groups, or "others." It's easy to imagine that people in those out-groups are opposed to everything we stand for—whether or not that's true (*Ripley, 2022*).

🗲 Blind values conflict

All conflicts are values conflicts in some way. If you and your partner go looking for a house to buy, and one of you values space and the other price, you'll have conflict. Values conflicts become bad conflicts when people believe their values are the only virtuous ones (*Guzmán, 2022*), and that to disagree with what they believe is to be wrong or even immoral.

We'll call this a blind values conflict.

One sure-fire way to get into a conflict like this is to be unaware of your own values. Unless you can see the motivations behind your beliefs and behaviors, you won't be able to see them as fallible. Parties in blind values conflicts often share a goal—like buying a house where your family is happy to live—but are unaware of those values or unable to communicate them.

Sour relationship conflict

Some conflicts happen where people just don't jive with each other. Differences in personalities, communications styles, and working styles can spur disagreements and wounded feelings (*Shonk, 2023*). Those turn nasty when we assume we know each other's motivations.

A manager heavily involved in the work of his direct reports could be seen as one who wants the team to produce clear, consistent outcomes. Or he could be seen as a micromanager. A boss who feels removed from the day-to-day work of their team could be seen as one who trusts his employees. Or he could be seen as out-of-touch and unsupportive.

The zero-sum game

Zero-sum conflicts feel like war. They designate winners and losers, so those entrenched in the conflict have no incentive to compromise, no incentive to understand their opponents, and no reason to collaborate (*Coleman, 2014*).



What bad conflict does to a workplace

Halyma is a dietician in the post-operative ward of a small hospital. While her colleague is out on maternity leave, she and another dietician, Anna, are assigned to share the responsibilities. Within a week, Halyma notices that Anna's half of the work isn't getting done. Halyma picks up the slack where she can, but it's too much for one person, so the quality of work slips. She asks Anna for help, but Anna pitches in with minimal work.

Two months in, their boss calls a meeting. He wants to know why there are so many loose ends. Halyma blames Anna, Anna blames Halyma. Dismissing it as a petty difference of personality, the manager tells them to resolve the problem between themselves, splitting the work 50/50. Rather than find a way to share the work, Halyma and Anna do very little of it.

By dismissing the dispute, their manager drives the conflict underground, turning what was nearly an overt conflict into a covert one. Anna tells coworkers on the floor that Halyma tried to get her in trouble, Halyma calls Anna lazy. Over time, the anger escalates, until one day Halyma says it: "I honestly hate her."

Their colleague returns from maternity leave to an embittered workplace and months of undone work. She's angry with Halyma and Anna, both of whom promised their support when she went on leave, and their boss, whom she counted on to have her back. By that time, much of the damage was done, factions were formed, sabotage was commonplace, and morale was tanked.





Conflict is an indelible part of the human experience, and it's often a good thing.

"In healthy conflict, there is movement. Questions get asked. Curiosity exists. There can be yelling, too. But healthy conflict leads somewhere. It feels more interesting to get to the other side than to stay in it."

—Amanda Ripley, High Conflict

Good conflict is:



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Curious

First and foremost, people involved in good conflict seek to understand each other. When people feel understood, they can relax and quit lashing out (*Ripley, 2021*). Curiosity brings disagreements out into the open where they can be dealt with harmoniously, and it shows us new ways of thinking, better ways of thinking. Curiosity forces us to refine our own opinions and makes us more empathetic and generous people.

Not the absence of conflict

Conflict, both good and bad, is a natural part of any relationship. When relationships look too glossy, too easy, there's reason to be suspicious. Conflict can be as gentle as a disagreement over how the team-building event budget should be allocated or as high stakes as who gets laid off. Thus, it makes sense to welcome civil disagreements into your workplace. As Coleman and Ferguson put it, "Nothing of value was ever created by a bunch of people sitting around agreeing on everything."

If your workplace appears totally without friction, you may be dealing with covert conflict, which can rot a team from within.



Overt, rather than covert

There is conflict in every workplace, and if you think yours is free of it, you're wrong. Covert conflicts are hidden and insidious. The people entangled in the conflict may not admit to it when asked, and some may not even know they're in a conflict. As long as conflict remains covert, it cannot be managed or resolved (Coleman, 2014). Nothing sanitizes like sunlight.

Making conflict overt creates the opportunity to identify misunderstandings and find common ground. Doing this requires self-reflection and contemplation, according to Coleman and Ferguson. It requires curiosity about others and their concerns, and a desire to understand what motivates them.

It is riskier to suppress conflict than to address it (Folger, 2021). Suppressed conflict grows like poisonous mold, and spoils relationships and trust.

Mot emotionless

We like to think that our work selves are purely pragmatic, logical, and reasonable. Emotions are for the weekends. But every conflict has an "emotional core" (Coleman, 2014). If we deceive ourselves into believing our point of view is unimpeachably logical, there's no room for understanding, no room for changing one's perspective, and no honesty.

Emotions can be a good part of conflict. We want our healthcare professionals to make decisions with empathy and our social justice advocates to be fired up. Emotion can propel us to do good and powerful things. It's what motivates a worker to stand up for their peer who's been bullied in the office and what makes us work like hell to prevent layoffs.

When we acknowledge and accept that emotions are intertwined with our conflict, we can keep them from ruling our relationships.

💕 Context-aware

All conflicts exist in context: the people involved, how they know each other and for how long, their rapport, and how much power each one of the wields (Coleman, 2014).

If we want conflict to produce positive results, everyone involved and anyone interested in intervening has to recognize when and where it's happening, and who is entangled. Conflict between coworkers who have known each other for two weeks is very different from conflict between coworkers who have known each other for ten years.



Good conflict moves us to be better

Jade and Maria work together at a software company. Jade's the new product design manager, and Maria is a long-time engineer for the company. They're butting heads over the timeline for the next product launch. Jade thinks the design project should prioritize speed—get it out to a large customer set in beta and make changes while users explore. Maria thinks they need to pump the brakes. She'd rather launch months later with a tighter product. Jade is an expert in product design and knows the value of user input, plus this strategy has worked brilliantly for her before. But Maria has been at the company longer and knows that last time they launched to a large audience in beta it was full of bugs. Executives made it clear that should never happen again.

If Jade and Maria don't talk about their different priorities:

- Jade is left to assume that Maria is inexperienced, doesn't like change, or worse—is trying to impede her work.
- Maria is left to assume that Jade is reckless, wasteful, or simply doesn't care whether she puts their jobs in jeopardy with a second shoddy product launch.

If they instead choose to understand each other's priorities:

- Jade can teach the team how to launch a product with fewer bugs, and the company can roll out better products more quickly.
- Maria can teach Jade how to navigate office politics and communicate with the C-suite.



Bad conflict ends with understanding

The way bad conflict is resolved will feel counterintuitive, but the more you practice, the more satisfying it becomes, more satisfying even than the conflict itself.

"People do escape high conflict . . . They don't suddenly agree, and this is important: they don't surrender their beliefs, nor do they defect, switching from one position to the opposite extreme. Instead, they do something much more interesting: they become capable of comprehending that with which they still disagree."

—Amanda Ripley, High Conflict

Conflict is not resolved by convincing the opposition that you're right and they're wrong. Conflict is resolved only by understanding the other side's point of view. That act of humility is uncomfortable, and for many feels like conceding or capitulating to the other side. But if we see conflict as the result of differently prioritized values, we're less likely to see understanding as weakness.

Here's how we know that understanding is the path out of bad conflict.

People are formed by their experiences, and those experiences influence their behavior and beliefs

In her book, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, Mónica Guzmán poses this question: What if we don't choose our opinions? Citing the academic David Smith, who studies disagreements, Guzmán challenges the idea that we can claim any high ground for our own opinions, no matter how "right" they might be.

She uses this question of Smith's: "Which do you value more: the truth or your own beliefs? Because they're not synonymous."

When we understand that we do not choose our motivations, but that our motivations are formed by our experiences, it's much easier to be generous toward others and ourselves. 1

People need to know they're understood before they can understand

"People need to believe you understand them, even as they realize you disagree, before they will hear you," writes Amanda Ripley in *High Conflict.*

Being understood lets people relax (*Ripley, 2021*). How many of us have seen this play out: An angry shopper approaches the customer service desk, ready to lob a complaint (or a dozen) at the clerk on the other side. The conversation is heated, and the shopper might even be raising his voice, when a cool-headed manager comes over and asks the shopper to slowly explain himself. Can't you already feel the temperature dropping? So this is the second time your grocery delivery was wrong? And the chicken was spoiled when you got it? I would be upset too! Let's see what we can do.

What was a spectacle has become a situation, one that the manager is better able to resolve—because he took the time to understand.

Understanding pays dividends in the workplace. Leaders who listen to their employees are viewed more positively by their subordinates, and workers who are good listeners tend to be higher performers. When we feel listened to, we have better relationships, we're more satisfied with our jobs, we experience more personal growth, and we're less likely to feel burnt out (*Itzchakov, 2017*).



Just as important as understanding others is understanding oneself

Many of us are under the impression that we are aware of what motivates us. After all, it's what drives your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Who would understand that better than you?

"In many conflicts," Ripley writes, "we have only the flimsiest grasp of our understory," that is, what is motivating our behaviors and desires. Many of us have caught ourselves in this gap: You snap at your spouse or your children, convinced they've wronged you in some way, only to realize that the latent headache you've been nursing all day has finally gotten the better of you.

When we examine our own motivations and the things we value most, we can more successfully moderate our emotions and make more rational decisions.



Conflict is highly ambiguous (Folger, 2021). How many nasty conflicts are the result of a simple misunderstanding? Someone's body language doesn't match the words they say and we decide they're lying (*Gladwell, 2019*). A poor attempt at a joke comes off as condescending sarcasm.

The fact is that we misinterpret what others say and do. We fail to identify our own motivations. We struggle to communicate how we feel (and why). We underestimate the effect our words and behaviors have on others.

Unless we take the time to understand others, and unless we understand our own beliefs and motivations—conflict will stay mired in the muck of ambiguity.



A difference in values moves out into the open

Kara and Michael don't particularly like each other. Kara thinks Michael is unfeeling and pragmatic. Michael thinks Kara is too concerned with intangibles that can't be tied to revenue. Their personalities have never meshed. But Kara and Michael are responsible for launching a new digital weekend magazine for a major news outlet. They'd better figure out how to make this relationship work.

One day, Kara goes into Michael's office and tells him: Look, it matters to me that the website is beautiful. I'm the target demographic for this magazine, and I'm telling you, it matters. I've worked in other jobs where design was sacrificed, and it shows. I understand that you're responsible for the P&L, and I know we have to be profitable if we're to survive, but I'm responsible for the user experience. We haven't gotten along in the past, but we both need to believe that our priorities don't have to compete.

Michael says he'll be more flexible about cost, resisting the urge to assign an ROI to every comma on the page, and Kara promises to be conscientious about spending. They agree to a weekly budget meeting for the next three months. They even agree to have lunch on the regular—just to get to know each other.

In a single conversation, Kara moves the conflict from covert to overt, making it easier to manage and succeed together.



How to solve the bad conflict you're in now

So, how will you clean up those toxic waters of workplace conflict gone bad?



Know yourself

Being blind to your own values is a sure way to breed conflict. Take stock of your feelings, motivations, and perceptions: What emotions are you feeling? What is motivating you at a deeper level? How might that influence your behavior in this situation? And how does it affect the way you see others?



Know the opposition

Sit down in a contained environment and with limited distractions. Now, listen to what the opposition is saying. Not only does understanding turn covert conflict into overt conflict, it helps people calm down too. Now demonstrate that you understand them. Repeat back to them, in your own words, what you think they're trying to communicate. Repeat until you get it right (*Ripley, 2021*).



Identify motivational gaps

Knowing yourself and knowing others will illuminate the differences in what motivates you, and using a platform like Attuned allows you to crystalize and visualize these differences (see page 18-19). If you know that you're highly motivated by Innovation, for example, but your colleague really values Security, you can begin to deconstruct the conflict. Remember, we don't choose our own opinions and values, so the gaps represent differences, not superiority.



Find common ground

It's likely that you and your opponent share some goals, or even some motivations. For example, colleagues who disagree on how a project should get done both want the project done well. Identify the common ground to build harmony.



Identify the emotion, don't let it rule

It helps to find the "emotional core"—because it's likely at the root of the conflict (*Coleman, 2014*). An employee who feels like they haven't been given credit for their contributions—and is therefore feeling hurt—might refuse to collaborate with their colleagues. Being able to say "When Sascha took credit for the sale that I spent months closing, I felt hurt and angry and taken advantage of" brings the heart of the conflict into the light.

How to get "traction"

In her book *I Never Thought of It That Way*, Mónica Guzmán writes about the five "dials" of a curious conversation that helps us avoid damaging conflict. She calls balancing these five dials *getting traction*.



Time

We need time to know each other. You know a lot more about someone you've spent a week with than someone with whom you've spent only an hour.



Attention

Participants must be able to devote their attention to the conversation. Phones down, computers closed.



Parity

Participants need to be on equal footing with each other. One person's voice cannot be more important than the other's.



Containment

The more public the conversion, the less people feel comfortable being honest—really honest—about how they feel. When we know others are watching, we tend to qualify, temper, or perform.



Embodiment

We gather so much information from body language, facial expressions, tone, volume, and pacing. The more we are able to see and hear our conversation companion, the better.



The challenge of parity

In almost all modern workplaces, there is a hierarchy. Because ending bad conflict requires that everyone be on equal footing, organizational structure will be an obstacle for companies. Nothing shows you power differences quite like conflict (*Coleman, 2014*).

Having power can actually make you worse at solving conflict. "Research has shown that the powerful tend to develop a very different psychological experience of the world than those in lower power," Coleman and Ferguson write. Those with power tend to think abstractly and consider people "in more instrumental terms." In other words: "Having power seems to impair your capacity to appreciate what others see, think, and feel."

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Likewise, the less power you have in the workplace, the riskier it is for you to express how you really feel. Out of self-preservation, or simply to keep peace, subordinates will tell leaders what they want to hear, not what they need to hear. Similarly, employees who feel that their point of view is not valued are less likely to share their thoughts (*Coleman, 2014*).

On top of relative power, your understanding of workplace culture is shaped by your intrinsic motivations, and when you lose the ability to empathize with those around you, it's easy to view your motivations as morally, strategically, logically superior—when they're not.

The higher you sit in the workplace hierarchy, the greater your responsibility to understand the values of your subordinates. Make it a regular practice. When we actively seek to understand those around us, others become less worried about the way they're perceived, social anxiety goes down, and Psychological Safety goes up *(Itzchakov, 2017)*.





Preventing bad conflict and facilitating the good

Companies can bust bad conflict before it ever occurs by creating a workplace that's unfriendly to the ugly friction that damages us.

Make a habit of talking about motivation

Employees can learn to express themselves in a way that both shares their point of view and the motivation behind it at the same time. One might say, "I think we're spending too much money on this project. I'll be evaluated on how the budget looks at the end of the year, and I have a responsibility to make sure we're in the black."



• Avoid factions, especially binary ones

Groups can be a good thing, but sometimes their very existence can foment us-versusthem thinking (Ripley, 2021). Before you create groups in the workplace, ask yourself how necessary they are and what purpose they serve. Binary groups are most susceptible to us-versus-them battles.



Don't fall into the social media trap

We're all familiar with the propensity of social media to divide us. Common workplace tools like Slack can replicate social media: Meaning is lost without the ability to see someone's mannerisms and tone, and conversations on these platforms are often visible to other colleagues too, so people will have a harder time being honest and may try to "win" a conflict.

This will be a challenge as teams become increasingly global. Groups whose members are purely virtual are more prone to conflict than are groups who share proximity (Folger, 2021). Whenever possible, facilitate face-to-face interactions when you suspect friction may occur.

Facilitate relationships

Don't underestimate the much-derided team-building activity. Psychologists tout the "magic ratio" in marriage: A couple needs five good interactions for every bad one

(Goldman, 2022). The same is true for work relationships, so give your employees the opportunity for good interactions.

Coleman and Ferguson call this an emotional reservoir. We have good emotional reservoirs and bad emotional reservoirs: "People who like each other can afford to be honest because they have a reserve of positive emotion. Like a bank account, if there are frequent deposits that add value, occasional withdrawals are less significant. Interpersonal conflict is not an isolated event; it always happens in the context of how strong and positive a relationship is at the time."

Practice "looping"

Gary Friedman, the attorney who invented the practice of mediation, used a simple technique when mediating divorces: When someone tells you what they think or how they feel, check to make sure you understand by repeating it back to them in your own words. Do this until they say you've got it right. He calls this "looping" (Ripley, 2021).

Refuse to accept simple answers

People aren't one-note. If a driver runs a stop sign and comes close to causing an accident, it's easy to assume that person is nothing but a careless driver who doesn't care about the safety of others. That may be true, but it's just as likely that the lousy driver is having a rough day—a bad diagnosis, a death in the family, a burst pipe in the basement. When we give others the benefit of the doubt, we don't make them into our enemies.

And when you make up your mind that you know what motivates someone else, you won't bother trying to understand them. As Guzmán writes, "If you think you know, you won't ask."

Accept the limits of understanding

Though we can understand the motivations of others, we cannot know everything about them. In Talking to Strangers, Malcolm Gladwell warns of the easy trap of believing we have mastered another person. "We think we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest clues. We jump at the chance to judge strangers. We would never do that to ourselves, of course. We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy."



Managing conflict with Attuned

At Attuned, we believe that understanding intrinsic motivation is a fundamental component for managing conflict in the workplace and ensuring that disagreements produce positive results.

Intrinsic motivations shape the way we communicate, the way we relate to and understand others, and the way we problem-solve. And each person's specific combination of intrinsic motivators is completely unique.

Using a 55-question assessment, we measure the extent to which each individual is driven by 11 key motivators identified by our team of psychologists. These are: Altruism, Autonomy, Competition, Feedback, Financial Needs, Innovation, Progress, Rationality, Security, Social Relationships, and Status. Once the assessment is complete, we use Al to generate an Intrinsic Motivation Report that scores each of these motivators from 0-100, giving managers a clear picture of what is most—and least important to their employees.

CHAPTER

Conflicts don't mark the absence of values, but rather a difference in what each person values most. We call that difference an interpersonal motivator gap

Conflicts don't mark the absence of values, but rather a difference in what each person values most. We call that difference an interpersonal motivator gap.

Managers are often in the position of managing workers with very different intrinsic motivations. Interpersonal motivator gaps can cause bad conflict, but awareness of those gaps can help promote curiosity instead of damage. Attuned's tools map those differences visually, so that users get a picture of opposing motivations and common ground.

By mapping your intrinsic motivations against those of a colleague, you might discover that, where you are highly motivated by Social Relationships, Security, and Altruism, your colleague is hardly motivated by those at all. When both of you can see these differences, understanding and empathy follow—you're free to have more frank conversations, curiously inquire about their point of view, and understand the limits of your own.

With a greater understanding of—and between—their employees, companies can eliminate bad conflict, boost productivity and innovation, and build a harmonious workplace culture.



The 11 Motivators

Attuned's Intrinsic Motivation Assessment generates a unique profile based on 11 intrinsic motivators identified by a team of psychologists. By understanding what each of these motivators mean, and the behaviors and preferences that they are associated with, colleagues can identify and navigate potential causes of conflict, while also recognizing areas of common ground.





Conclusion

Unless we seek to understand each other, we cannot end the bad conflict that infects our workplaces. There are an endless number of approaches to conflict management and conflict resolution—academics and researchers devote their careers to the study of these things—but common to nearly all of them is the idea that greater awareness and understanding is fundamental.

Knowing what motivates ourselves and others, we can make room for curiosity, reduce misunderstanding, and end the bad conflict that weighs us down.



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Attuned helps organizations create happier, healthier, more productive workplaces.

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